

REPORT

Dr. Alex Cunliffe

Work Based Learning for Refugee Studies students

Aims

- To develop positive relationships with local actors and organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees in order to provide opportunities for suitable students to undertake voluntary work in the sector as part of their studies.
- To provide students with valuable work experience of direct relevance to their degree.
- To provide students with experience of working in the Non Governmental sector and develop their curriculum vitae for career development and employability prospects
- Students to make a presentation of their experiences in working with asylum seekers and refugees in the city as part of the assessment criteria (Seminar presentation 25%) which currently exists on the module, Refugee Studies (IRL 3203).
- To develop the undergraduate programme to provide students with a broader experience of work based learning; opportunities for the more informed pursuit of research, vocational activity and community participation

Method

In order to capitalise upon my research interests and develop work based learning for undergraduate International Relations students, this project has been developing opportunities for Stage 3 Refugee Studies (IRL3203) students to become involved with local refugee organisations.

February 2007 – September 2008

Contact with actors and organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees in Plymouth and the South order to determine most suitable actors for placement experience. A large number of organisations were contacted and/or interviewed. In the Plymouth area, these included:

Claire Hill
Volunteer Centre Manager
Plymouth Guild
Ernest English House
Buckwell Street
Plymouth
PL1 2DA

Devon & Cornwall Refugee Support Council
7 Whimble Street,
Plymouth
Devon
PL1 2DH

Refugee Action
4th Floor,
Prideaux Court
Palace Street
Plymouth
PL1 2AY

START
Students and Refugees Together,
237 Union Street
Plymouth

Refugee Studies (IRL3203) module has a very large intake of 40+ and demand for placement opportunity exceeds supply. Students were asked to submit interest in writing followed by a series of personal interviews. The short listing and formal interview process was continued with the service providers. Initial interest from the students was high with at least 15 students expressing an interest in writing each year. Because of the sensitive nature of the work and the need for commitment and maturity, the selection process was rigorous (written submissions, interviews and training). **Five** students were chosen for the academic year 2007-08 and **four** for the academic year 2008-09.

The first tranche of successful students began training and placements in **October 2007**. Placement opportunities include, **Refugee Action** which provides high quality, impartial and non-directive advice to asylum seekers and refugees. Refugee Action in Plymouth holds the Legal Services Commission Quality Mark for general help with casework for refugees. Also involved was **START (Students and Refugees Together)** which runs a number of projects including 'Cultural Kitchen' and 'Allotment' projects.

Regular meetings were held with the placement organisations and the students to monitor progress. All the students opted to make a presentation of their experiences as part of their assessment on the module (25% seminar presentation). The presentations proved to be amongst the best in each year and generally attained first class marks.

Student Feedback

Madeline Corrigan:

'I felt this would benefit my course and would give me a greater insight into the module Refugee Studies and also how the system works, this advanced knowledge could be used to enhance my university work and future job prospects, as I am interested in working for the Home Office, Immigration and Border Control is a major section of the Home Office.'

'My experiences working at Refugee Action have been very enjoyable and informative and helpful to the module. The office is welcoming and friendly, you are made to feel part of the team, are involved in the daily meetings, discussions, invited to social events, Christmas lunches and national refugee action events.'

'The role of casework assistant has given me lots of new skills and it has helped to bring the issues we learn about in the module to life and gives them greater weight and helps with understanding concepts and the legislation.'

'The staff at RA (Refugee Action) are always happy to answer questions and help with the course in anyway. Being involved with RA means that you get access to their internal documents and emails which are helpful and we would otherwise not hear or learn about.'

Esther Ezquerro:

'The placement has helped me... To do well at university, to reach personal targets set regarding grades.'

- *Improve understanding of the course itself*
- *Gain increased confidence in my own opinions about aspects learnt on the course*
- *Understand more about Refugees and Asylum Seekers, the processes etc*
- *Be able to improve presenting and essay writing skills i.e. being able to explain my given topic confidently and coherently to the rest of the class.'*

Samantha Frost:

'The placement is going very well and I am learning a lot first hand about the British processing of Asylum seekers. The staff at Refugee Action have been very supportive.'

Agency Feedback

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS STUDENT VOLUNTEER PLACEMENTS

AT REFUGEE ACTION, PLYMOUTH 2008/2009

'During these two years Refugee Action has taken on 3 students each year to help with supporting our case work. We do not use any volunteers to provide face to face advice but as volunteers the students have been tremendously helpful in following up case work with phone calls, sending faxes for us and doing research our case workers would not have time to do.

The work of Refugee Action is very demanding since most clients are asylum seekers in a precarious position or in many cases are refused and may become destitute if they cannot get temporary support with our support.

The students are aware of these issues and ask us questions to illuminate their understanding. However all have been helpful and not been intrusive when we are busy.

The arrangement between us and the International relations department has been mutually helpful, and we would wish to continue it next year.'

*Jane Robinson,
Area Manager
24th March 2009*

Findings/Outcomes/Impacts

The project has proved to be an overwhelming success and has met all the aims initially set. The students have gained positive and practical experience of working in the voluntary sector in a field of direct relevance to their programme of study. The placements have not only developed their curriculum vitae and prospects for post University employment but the experiences fed directly into their assessments on IRL3203 and contributed to high academic performances. The student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

At the same time, the voluntary agencies involved have reported in very positive fashion in terms of the voluntary contributions of the students. This is partly a reflection of the relatively rigorous selection and training process involved following a very popular initial response from the students enrolled upon IRL3202, Refugee Studies. Moreover, the positive feedback from the agencies has served to develop closer working relationships between the University and local non-governmental organisations.

Dissemination/Continuation

In conjunction with EDaLT (University of Plymouth) and Refugee Action, a **poster** (attached) has been produced advertising the project and the placement opportunities for students. A presentation by Dr Cunliffe and Jane Robinson (Manager, Refugee Action) was made at the **VCs Teaching and Learning Conference (July 2008)** outlining the details, progress and outcomes of the project.

The agencies have expressed a strong desire to continue the placement opportunities. It is the module leader's wish to do so and, if possible involve more agencies and extend the opportunity to postgraduates enrolled upon IRL515 (Refugee Studies) as part of the **Masters in International Relations** programme.

If the funding could be obtained to continue and expand the programme to include more service providers and thereby more students on both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, this would be extremely beneficial for the University's students and standing in the City.

Dr. S. Alex Cunliffe
International Relations
March 2009

TQEF Research-Informed Teaching Initiative



Work Based Learning for Refugee Studies Students



This two year project is being developed to provide opportunities for suitable students of International Relations to undertake voluntary work with asylum seekers and refugees as part of the Stage 3 Refugee Studies module. The intention is to provide students with work based learning experiences and to develop their closer understanding of this controversial issue. Students are then encouraged to make a presentation of their experiences in working with asylum seekers and refugees as part of the assessment criteria that currently exists on the module.



Between February 2007 and September 2007 work was started to determine the most suitable "actors" for placement experience. A large number of organisations were contacted and/or interviewed. In Plymouth these included:

Refugee Action,
4th Floor, Prideaux Court,
Palace street
Plymouth
PL1 2AY

START
Students and Refugees Together
237 Union Street
Plymouth

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The Refugee Studies module has a very large intake of 40+ and initial demand for placement opportunity exceeds supply. Students are thereby asked to submit interest in writing followed by a set of personal interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the work, short listing and formal interview processes have been developed with the service providers.

From November 2007, placement opportunities have included Refugee Action. Refugee Action is an independent, national charity and the Plymouth office provides high quality, impartial and non-directive advice to both asylum seekers and refugees through a mixture of drop-in sessions, appointments and phone advice.

Also START (Students and Refugees Together) run a number of projects including "Cultural Kitchen" (a meeting place for refugees and asylum seekers to cook and share a healthy meal and socialise) and "Allotment" (allotments are found in Central Park).

It is hoped that the initiative will prove to be a long term success providing opportunities, experience and help for all those involved.